DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 569 CS 215 520

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TITLE Risk Communication in the Cultural Studies Composition Classroom. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-CS-96-10
PUB DATE 96
CONTRACT RR93002011
NOTE 3p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Indiana University, 2805 E. 10th Street, Suite 150, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *Cultural Context; Higher Education; *Persuasive Discourse; Political Issues; Risk; Writing Assignments; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Cultural Studies; Discourse Communities; ERIC Digests; Message Transmission; Rhetorical Devices; *Risk Communication; Writing Topics

ABSTRACT

Defining risk communication as the "interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions,...involving multiple messages about the nature of risk," this Digest argues that risk communication has much to offer instructors of cultural studies composition who want to revive students' sense of personal risk in the discursive practices of their culture. The Digest outlines how to introduce risk communication into the cultural studies composition classroom, and the opportunities it offers to students, including: (1) allowing students to choose topics of real risk for study; (2) encouraging students to study issues that matter to them, issues that they feel represent real risk in their lives; (3) teaching students to decipher risk messages and leading them to study stories of blame by critiquing data and language used to construct stereotypes about certain members of society; (4) encouraging students to situate themselves in discursive practices; and (5) providing students with the tools for participating in the public sector. The Digest concludes that through the study of risk communication in cultural studies composition, students can be taught methodologies that will enable them to participate in society as more informed, productive citizens. (NKA)

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ERIC Digest

ED 399 569

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Risk Communication in the Cultural Studies Composition Classroom

by Cynthia A. Ryan

The field of risk communication has much to offer instructors of cultural studies composition who want to revive students' sense of personal risk in the discursive practices of their culture. Broadly defined, risk communication refers to the "interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions,...involving multiple messages about the nature of risk." The term refers to "other messages, not strictly about risk, that express concerns, opinions, or reactions to risk messages or to legal and institutional arrangements for risk management" (Committee on Risk Perception and Communication, 1989). Introducing these messages (and the theory behind their dissemination) into the cultural studies composition classroom provides a number of opportunities that current pedagogies fail to offer, 4 of which will be discussed in this Digest.

Choosing Topics of Real Risk

The study of risk communication as a cultural process allows students to choose topics of real risk for study. The "content" of the cultural studies composition course centers, then, on strategies for exploring the messages about these risks through a variety of media. Topics of risk are automatically situated in current sociohistorical contexts, involving issues with which college students as members of particular communities are concerned.

At the start of the semester, students are asked to read a selection of essays focusing on the concept of "generations" in Diana George and John Trimbur's text, *Reading Culture: Contexts for Reading and Writing* (1992). Now, it is evident in class discussions that many students feel that the authors of these essays have sadly missed the mark in expressing what the concerns of their generation are.

In one of the essays, Michael Oreskes argues that members of today's MTV generation fail to involve themselves in political issues and worldly events in the committed way that youths from past eras had. Many students, however, respond angrily to such accusations, stating that they have a number of issues about which they feel quite strongly. Unfortunately, they claim, they feel powerless to change the world they have inherited from those past generations Oreskes praises. The reasons for their sense of disempowerment? They are inundated with messages about the complexity, dishonesty, and inflexibility of the political system. Further, they are overwhelmed by the devastating messages they receive via television and magazines about the dire state of a society with little promise of a better future. Students have absolutely no faith in their ability to decipher the "system" and to get "democracy" to work.

A course centered on risk communication would encourage students to begin with issues that matter to them, issues that they feel represent real risk in their lives. The frustration that results from the onslaught of messages about these issues can be viewed as an opportunity to teach students how communication constructs our perspectives about certain dangers (e.g., AIDS) and about diverse groups of people in society. Essentializing statements such as "Nothing I do will make a difference" or "We'll probably all die from environmental poisoning anyway" are clearly tied to the multiple risk messages distributed daily across a wide range of media, from classrooms to television tabloids to local newspapers to community interest groups. It makes sense, then, to help students untangle *these* messages so that they can more intelligently judge for themselves just how much control they *do* have in their lives and how much power they have to effect change in the environments within which they interact.

Examining Guidelines and Information

Because risk communicators must consider rhetorical factors when preparing scientific findings for public consumption, there is an element of selectivity in every risk message. Examining both the guidelines by which risk communicators regulate their messages and the resulting information that individuals receive can be an excellent source for cultural critique. Clearly, the content and dissemination of risk information relies on considerations that are highly value-laden in nature. For instance, consider the ongoing war over tobacco. The tendency for the public to identify "villains" in risk situations is evidence of the subjective nature of this form of communication. A course focused on teaching students to decipher risk messages can lead them to study these stories of blame by critiquing the data and language used to construct stereotypes about certain members of society.

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If "A Consumer's Guide to Risk and Risk Communication" (National Research Council) were written for the general public, as the Council has suggested, such a guide would outline the basic knowledge necessary for citizens to understand more clearly both the process by which risk messages are constructed and conveyed and the strategies that individuals can use to analyze and interpret them. Simplified definitions and explanations of such notions as "comparability" (e.g., the risk caused by smoking as compared to the risk taken when riding a bicycle down a busy city street), "risk magnitudes" (e.g., determining just how great a risk one is taking by living in a certain area of the U.S.), and "validity of findings" are ways in which we can make more Americans "risk literate." Involvement in the formation and translation of risk messages seems a much better way to teach students how discursive practices work than situating them in closed contexts such as class and asking them to locate experiences that fall within the boundaries established by the teacher.

Focusing on Concrete Messages

Focusing on concrete messages versus on abstract categories for study (e.g., race, class, or gender) encourages students to situate *themselves* in discursive practices. Rather than beginning with prefabricated units which limit their ideas, students are able to draw conclusions about power relations and institutional influences in their daily lives by examining the use of data and language to motivate public opinion and behavior regarding risk.

Government and corporate risk communication practices have been widely criticized over the past decades, as citizens and members of private and public interest organizations claim that dishonest and inaccurate messages have affected regulations that fail to protect all social groups. The voices of cultural studies theorists seem to resonate in such criticisms of the "system" for failing to treat people fairly and equally (Rowan, 1994). Yet, rather than beginning with stories of race or class or gender mistreatment, critics of risk assessment, communication, and management go to the source of problematic discursive practices. When public and private interest groups identify a lack of information or an overlooked audience in risk communication that leads or contributes to discriminatory conclusions and resulting policies, they also identify concrete data upon which to lodge their campaigns for change.

Incorporating the Political from the Start

The reception of risk communication has very real consequences for public attitude, behavior, and policy. While in many critical cultural studies pedagogies, the political implications of cultural study are merely assumed, a course based on risk communication incorporates the political from the start. Students can influence the formulation and perception of risk messages by actively exploring their implications and responding to those individuals and institutions responsible for producing them.

A cultural studies composition course focusing on risk communication provides students with the tools for participating in the public sector. According to Niklas Luhmann, author of *Risk: A Sociological Theory* (1993), media rely on individuals and groups in society to keep interest in risk issues alive. Only through the identification of conflicting views and values regarding risks can the debate about how scientific data is gathered, disseminated, and standardized through public policy continue over time. Students clearly need to gain some knowledge, then, about how to assess risk information and participate in its transference to the public if they want to maintain the freedom to make choices concerning health and safety. And, in the composition classroom, they must be empowered to select their own topics of risk for paper assignments.

Conclusion

In the past several years, some attempts to incorporate risk into the classroom have been made. However, in most cases the teacher selects the risk issues, and the avenues for critique rest on predetermined categories of race, class, or gender (Bowen, 1993; Kutzer, 1992). Though James Berlin and Michael Vivion claim in *Cultural Studies in the English Classroom* (1992) that "cultural studies is not a prescribed content, but instead a method or various methods of making meaning and exploring how meaning is made" (see also Leight, 1995), most pedagogies cover quite similar topics or contexts. The cultural studies composition course, however, should deliver what it promises. Students can be taught methodologies that will enable them to participate in society as more informed, productive citizens.

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This publication was prepared with partial funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract number RR93002011. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.